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April 2013: Jeffry Mitchell @ Henry Art Gallery



Jeffry Mitchell, Pickle Jar with Silver Elephants, 2007. Glazed earthenware with platinum luster.

Image courtesy of James Harris Gallery.

Jeffry Mitchell: Like a Valentine
Henry Art Gallery
October 27, 2012 - January 27, 2013

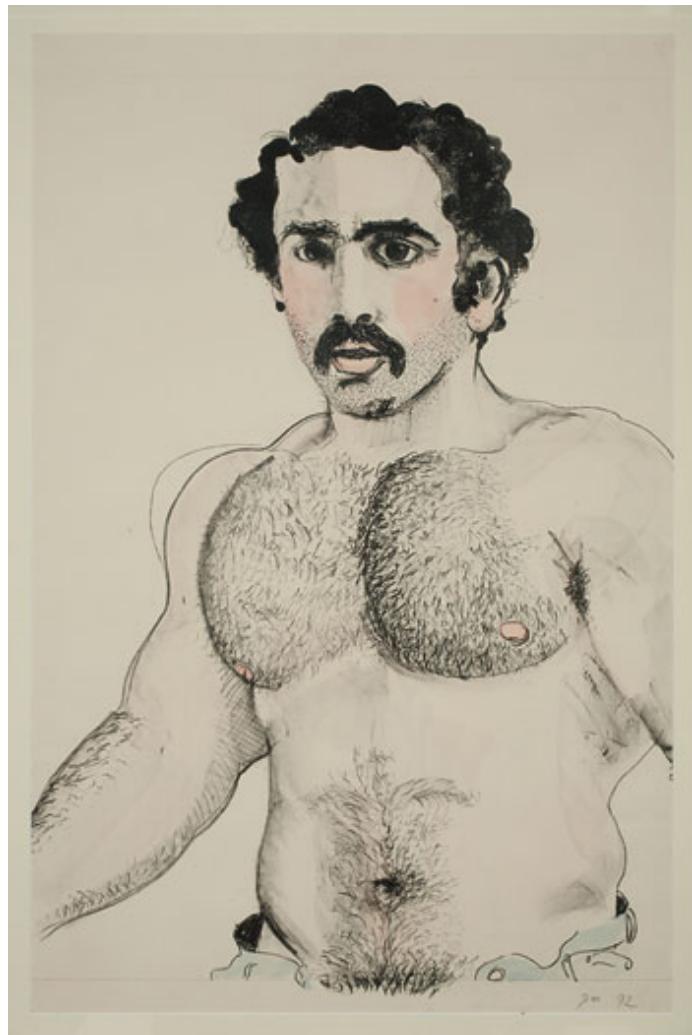
by Amanda Manitach

Jeffry Mitchell's work is compulsive: compulsively pretty, compulsively ribald, compulsively childlike, crude, prolific, and so on. In person, the artist is also compulsively sweet, childlike, and ribald. Everyone up here in the Northwest knows him. He's one of our best.

I'm writing from Seattle. If you're unfamiliar with our neck of the woods, Mitchell is a good place to start looking. Among other things, Seattle has a reputation as a place overrun by craft. Glass, ceramics, and woodworking are certainly not lost art forms up here, for better or worse. Some artists have turned the mediums on their heads in the best ways: Northwest natives Eli Hansen and Oscar Tuazon's fantastical, hand-blown

meth labs. Dan Webb's punk rock wood carvings. In the realm of ceramics, Mitchell's work has taken the medium to a uniquely subversive and personal space.

Mitchell just wrapped up a retrospective, *Like a Valentine*, at University of Washington's Henry Art Gallery, where marble halls were filled with twenty-five years' worth of work in almost every medium imaginable. His oeuvre reflects his persona: positive, gregarious, Catholic, gay. The man has close-cut, snow-dappled hair, a gap-tooth smile, intoxicating blue eyes. The art he makes is equally intoxicating, trademarked by a pervasive, ejaculatory whiteness, frolicking, totemic animals, and a sweetness darkly carnivalesque and sexual.



*Jeffry Mitchell, Bruno Poster, 1992. Lithograph with watercolor on paper.
Courtesy of the artist.*

Like the two elephant lamps in a rotunda opening up onto the *Valentine* exhibit, the first of Mitchell's objects you come across, the ceramic bases are cartoonish creatures standing alone on a plinth, light bulbs protruding from up-thrust trunks, electrical cords issuing from anal sphincters. Elsewhere, rooms are overrun with lumpy, funerary vases covered in knotted phalli, faux-Delft figurines of coupled animals (his favorites are elephants, rabbits, bears), paper lanterns delicately cut out, and decadently ornate pickle

jars. Some galleries reflect Mitchell's longstanding interest in Japanese calligraphy (which he studied while teaching English in Japan), ink drawing, all forms of printmaking, and the morbidity of fin de siècle French poets. The fascinations of artists like James Ensor are reflected in his predilection for grinning skulls. Often imagery works on the level of double entendre. For instance, a riotous, silver-leaved lithograph on flimsy tissue looks like an oversize mandala (or sphincter) from across the gallery. Upon closer examination, the piece, titled Circle of Hate, reveals a lacework of terrifying, grinning faces, spiders, genitalia. In another room, lush pastel watercolor paintings blossom with glory holes dressed up as flowers. Everything is what it seems, and more.

Beyond the intricacies of influence informing Mitchell's work, the thing that strikes you at this retrospective is how auteur-like the artist is. A real Renaissance man, Mitchell makes every medium his plaything, literally, and not without grace.

People like to describe his effortless touch as "casual." Despite the fact that plenty of effort obviously goes into the production of each piece, the handmade ease is exemplary of a deliberate, regional brand of romanticism that champions Ruskinian anti-industrialism. Sure, it's a cliché, but it's a genuine sensibility that shies away from fussy finish and slickness and embraces the political potential of art forms that champion rather than shy away from the cheesy associations of craft. We're not talking the glass factory gloss of Chihuly. Rather, Mitchell's kind of craft speaks a language of touch (handmade) that's emphatically personal and communal. His practice is a metaphoric laying on of hands, and essentially one of transubstantiation, turning raw material into something spiritual by pushing the psychological, human softness of craft to its limits. Lumpy, erotic pottery imprinted with his message (his message) is merely the tip of the iceberg. Typographical alphabets written on vellum are watery and hand-lettered, like an illicit note. Installations illuminated by the dull blaze of naked lightbulbs shining through paper cut-outs look like lo-fi gobos casting whispered sweet-nothings at a wall. "HELLO HELLO" they say. Always, Mitchell extends an invitation to engage. ("HELLO HELLO" is iterated over and over in his pieces like a mantra. Like a valentine.) This is why everyone is ensorcelled by Jeffry Mitchell.



Jeffry Mitchell, Jesus Buddha, 1993. Watercolor and ink on plaster.

Courtesy of the artist.



Jeffry Mitchell, Pickle Jar. 2005, earthenware with metallic glaze.

Image courtesy of James Harris Gallery.